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# “Where does it say I have to do that?”

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## **How can middle years teachers enact assessment policy for students with disabilities?**

**Jennie Duke**

### ***Abstract***

This report investigates effective ways middle years teachers can enact curriculum policy related to assessment for learning with students with disabilities. Assessment for learning (AfL) has gained recent importance through inclusion in assessment policy. AfL is the frequent assessments of student progress that identifies learning needs and informs future teaching and learning. The application of AfL principles provides opportunity for teachers to improve the achievement of students with disabilities. AfL is an element of the Queensland *P-12 Curriculum Framework*. School leaders can use this report’s suggestions to make sense of policy; develop common and shared beliefs and actions; organize professional learning opportunities; arrange collaborative curriculum planning to influence staff to effectively implement curriculum policy.

## Introduction

The existence of a policy does not necessarily mean that a school will 'enact' it (Fulcher, 1997). Queensland Government's current *P-12 Curriculum Framework* provides schools with a direction to achieve "a curriculum for all". However, experience with working with middle years teachers in secondary schools is that they are commonly unaware of the implications of this policy to their everyday work. In fact, they sometimes respond to any references to a "curriculum for all" (meaning providing a curriculum for all students in their class, including those with disabilities) with "Where does it say I have to do that?" Meaning, "...where is that in writing?"

Inclusive education in itself is "arguably the biggest challenge facing school systems" (Ainscow, 2005, p. 182). The challenges of inclusive and standards-based reforms are even more challenging in the secondary school context where reform has been historically slower (Fullan, 2000).). It is acknowledged that curriculum adjustments, including assessment, for students with disabilities (SWD) is more difficult in secondary schools because of the tensions of curriculum, highly structured timetabling, limited teaching time, lack of parental involvement and inflexible teaching approaches (Pearce & Forlin, 2005). The structures and demands of secondary schools may complicate and compromise inclusive practices (Ainscow, 2005; Pearce & Forlin, 2005). In Australia, academic commentary has called for an "urgent need" for further research and policy development in relation to the way secondary schools successfully include students with disabilities (Shaddock, Giorcelli, Smyth-Lyon, 2007, p. 11). Black and William (2001, p. 10) when outlining steps for implementing assessment for learning note that teachers need –

...a variety of living examples of implementation, by teachers with whom they can identify and from whom they can derive both convictions and confidence that they can do better, and see concrete examples of what doing better means in practice.

Many schools enacting policy and legislation related to students with disabilities are confused about why this is needed and how it can be accomplished effectively (King-Sears, 2008). Much research has been done about inclusive education and the issues surrounding it. Arguments within the debate include anxiety because teachers have not been trained or prepared to work with students with disabilities, lack of staff development in learning and teaching, frustration with school and departmental processes, such as increased paperwork, lack of funding, human and material resources, lack of time for planning and meetings, difficulties maintaining discipline and challenging all students (Horne & Timmons, 2007; Lindsay, 2004; Shaddock et al., 2007).

Guskey and Jung (2009) argue that teachers at all stages of education “struggle with their efforts to assign fair, accurate, and meaningful grades to students with disabilities, especially those placed in general education classrooms” (p. 53). In contrast, there is also much advice available to schools through the commentary research of academics to support schools. There are also settings where enacting assessment policy for SWD are reported to be successful.

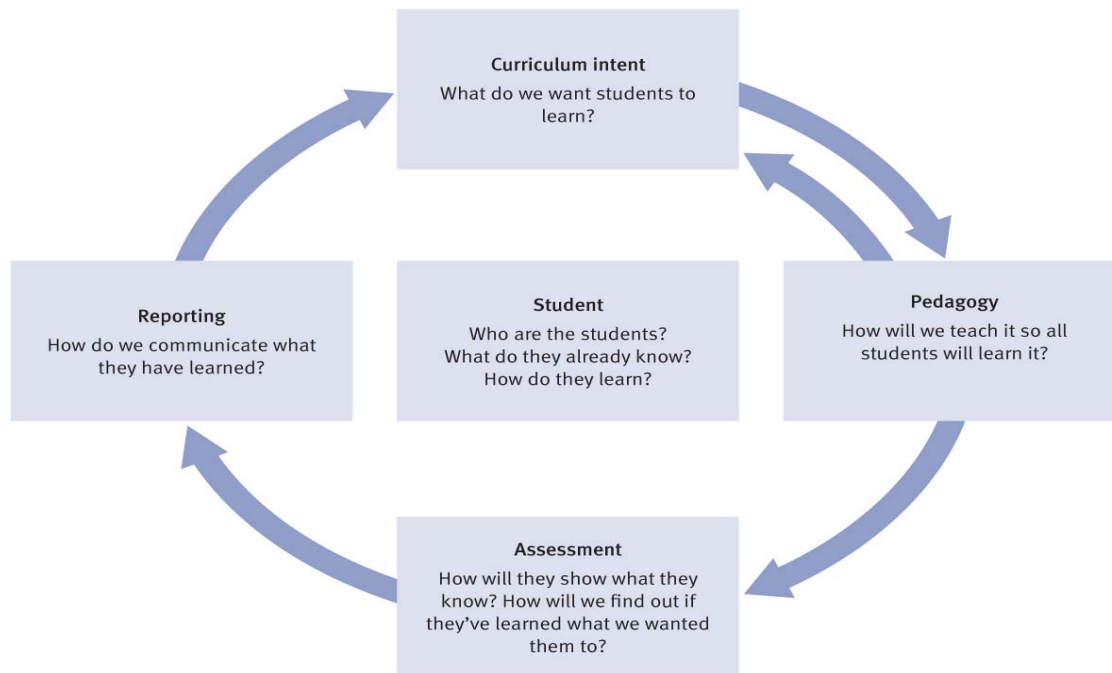
## **Policy Context – Queensland**

The Queensland Government’s *P-12 Curriculum Framework Policy* and its guidelines for assessing student achievement and moderating teacher judgments and guidelines for students with disabilities, were released in November 2008 .The P-12 Curriculum Framework contains four policy statements that are “mandated for state primary, secondary and special schools” (Queensland Government, 2008, p. 3). The mandated actions for schools relating to assessment is Policy Statement 2 –

Monitor and assess individual student achievement and evaluate it against state-wide and national standards, regularly using collaborative processes to support teachers in making consistent judgments.

(Queensland Government, 1008, p. 5).

Relating to assessment, the *P-12 Curriculum Guidelines for SWD* (Queensland Government, 2008) recommends teachers plan all teaching and assessment with required adjustments for all students so they have access to and achieve the curriculum. This requires the “curriculum to be inherently designed for flexibility and able to support teachers to be responsive to students’ educational needs in a proactive way” (p. 1). Students are placed at the centre of the process and teachers are required to align the needs of students to the other components of curriculum (Figure 2). The guidelines recommend the processes of collaborative teacher planning and co-teaching to design and provide “multiple opportunities” (p. 13) for all students to learn and demonstrate their learning.



**Figure 2 :** Aligning curriculum (Queensland Government, 2008, p. 8)

The policy and its guidelines define the two major types of assessment, formative ‘assessment for learning’ and summative, ‘assessment of learning’. (2008). The guidelines define ‘assessment for learning’ as

....the frequent, interactive assessments of student progress and understanding to identify learning needs and adjust teaching appropriately. It is used continually to inform teaching and learning.

(Queensland Government, 2008, p. 2)

## Assessment for learning

The potential for assessment to improve student learning is well documented (Black & William, 2001) and sometimes overlooked in secondary schools. In secondary schools there may be an emphasis on summative scores of achievement resulting from the influence of high-stakes

testing. Another factor is that some secondary teachers are less comfortable with “open-ended, student centered” assessment (Marsh, 2007, p. 27). According to Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & William (2003), implementation of AfL requires “personal change” for teachers (p. 80). For some teachers a personal change may include learning how to provide multiple opportunities and ways for students to demonstrate their learning. This requirement, to provide multiple opportunities and ways for students is a key message of the *P-12 Curriculum Framework* and aspect of AfL.

How can AfL improve learning for SWD in the middle years?

### **Aligning of curriculum and assessment**

Alignment of curriculum to assessment is a common theme in literature about AfL and in recent years has challenged the view of assessment being separate from learning (Gardner, Harlen, Hayward & Stobart, 2008). Zepke, Leach, Brandon, Chapman, Neitze, Rawlins & Scott (2005) completed a comprehensive literature review of standards based assessment and cite numerous studies that reveal that the closer the alignment of teaching and assessment the “better students achieve” (p. 25). Alignment of teaching and assessment processes is implicit in AfL as its purpose is to provide information to students and teachers to improve learning and direct future teaching (Black, 1996; Black et al., 2003; Black & William, 2001 and Marsh, 2007).

### **Focusing teaching and learning**

If one purpose of AfL is to align teaching, learning and assessment, then it could be assumed that teachers using AfL will provide more focused teaching and learning opportunities for students since they are clear about their needs. Black & William (2001) note that for

assessment to function formatively, the results have to be used to adjust teaching and learning, thus focusing on the needs of the learners. Black et al. (2007) found that teachers who use AfL thought of teaching “in terms of facilitating students’ learning” (p. 91). The teachers saw the purpose of their teaching was to focus on how to help students learn. If the students did not learn, “then they had to rethink the lesson and try another way” (p. 91).

### **Building shared understanding and language**

Gardner et al. (2008) have determined that the “major first step in establishing a common language to use in the context of assessment by teachers is the identification of principles widely held” (p. 16). Without this step discussion about assessment practices may “dissolve into a melee of jargon” (p. 15) used to describe different types of assessment its uses and perceptions about its quality. Discussions about assessment should be based upon what teachers believe is important about assessment. They contend that principles such as “assessment of any kind should ultimately improve learning” (p.16) and this needs to be established by staff to build shared understanding and language.

### **Improving student motivation to demonstrate learning**

A major element of AfL is that assessment is not merely “done to students”, rather than “done for students to guide and enhance their learning” (Marsh, 2007, p. 26). Students are provided with frequent and useful feedback about their progress through the AfL process. They are given credit for what learning they demonstrate “when not bounded by the constraints of comparators that reflect other children, not the curriculum” (Cumming, 2009, p. 10). Students are given opportunity to respond to feedback through the AfL process by reflecting on their work and making improvements. Marsh (2007) sees this as a benefit for students as it allows students to be involved in the process through feedback and empowers them to realize their own learning needs and to have control of their learning, thus ensuring motivation and raising achievement.



## **Increasing consistency of teacher judgment**

The role of teacher judgment through moderation about the quality of student achievement of content standards is important within the AfL process (Wyatt-Smith & Klenowski, 2008).

Moderation provides the context for teachers to share interpretations of assessment tasks and the requisite standards and to develop a common language for describing and assessing students' work (Klenowski, 2009). Wyatt Smith & Klenowski (2008) warn that their observations in middle years of schooling demonstrate that this process will not necessarily occur “ in the absence of policy direction” (p. 10).

## **Suggestions for success**

The review of literature relating to successful policy implementation in schools and the use of AfL uncovered a number of themes. These themes will be used in this report as suggestions for success for the implementation of policy related to SWD and AfL in secondary schools. These suggestions are;

- leaders need to “makes sense” of policy for teachers,
- the teaching team develops common and shared beliefs and actions,
- relevant professional learning opportunities are provided,
- collaborative curriculum planning and delivery is arranged.

## **Leaders “make sense” of policy for teachers**

Academic commentary about assessment, secondary schools and students with disability, does not centre on the inappropriateness of the policies that direct schools. It describes the barriers to why these policies are not enacted. For example, a barrier can be the attitude of some

teachers. Fulcher (1989) contends that teaching is not just a technical process and that teaching involves political, moral and technical dimensions (p. 8). In fact, moral and political dimensions precede a teacher's decision about how or what to teach. Fulcher reminds us that

Teachers, like everyone else, are equally members of an unequal society and may contribute to, or undermine, this inequality.

(Fulcher, 1989, p. 259)

When a school leader "makes sense" (Fullan, 2000) of policy for teachers. They can persuade and influence staff to "undermine...inequality" (Fulcher, 1989, p.259). Australian researchers, Shaddock et al. (2007, pg. 10) found that school leaders played a "pivotal role in supporting inclusive practice". Shaddock et al., (2007) also noted that successful teachers demonstrated awareness of relevant legislation and policy and the implications on their daily work. This awareness is a result of the provision of learning opportunities by leaders to uncover the relevance of policy and make sense of it for teachers. Closely aligned to "making sense" of policy is the provision of opportunity for teachers to develop common and shared beliefs and actions through professional learning.

### **The teaching team has common and shared beliefs and actions**

In the context of assessment of SWD in the middle years of learning, there are a number of areas that require common and shared beliefs and actions. Firstly, general and special education staff need to break down the division between the two educational fields and develop a common language based upon the curriculum and the needs of students (Defur, 2005; Lynch & Adams, 2008). Secondly, teachers need to establish common and shared beliefs and actions about AfL (Gardner et al., 2008). This report suggests that this can be a result of professional

conversations during relevant learning opportunities provided by school leaders (Fullan, 2000; Senge, 2001).

### **Relevant professional learning opportunities**

When discussing the issues related to policy implementation in education, Cohen –Baron (1993) noted that “....learning for the enactors is essential” (p. 208). This learning, also supported by the work of Fullan (2000) requires leaders to focus on the background and relevance of policy to teacher’s every day practice. Gardner et al. (2008, p. 11) attribute professional learning as a key process for sustaining change in assessment practice.

### **Collaborative curriculum planning and delivery is arranged**

Pugach and Warger (2001, p. 195) highlight the need for a curriculum focus for successful collaboration as it provides the “philosophical shift necessary for moving away from the student as the problem to the curriculum as something teachers need to work with in relationship to the student”. Shaddock et al. (2007) confirmed that teachers who are effective teachers of SWD in mainstream classrooms, “routinely collaborated with colleagues, parents and other students” (p. xii). Their research into effective collaboration in schools found that a critical factor was “school culture and ethos, particularly as mediated by the executive...” (p. xiv) influencing the success of collaboration.

### **Application of suggestions**

C is the Head of Special Education Services (HOSSES) at a special education program (SEP) in the middle years at a secondary school. She has a reputation of ‘enacting’ the policy statements for the *P-12 Curriculum Framework* in an efficient and effective manner for SWD in her school. In this section, her experiences are presented and analyzed as they relate to the suggestions

for success derived from the literature for assessment for learning for SWD in secondary schools. C participated in a semi-structured, open ended, conversational interview about her experiences implementation of the *P-12 Curriculum Framework* and its guidelines.

C assessed the knowledge of the P-12 Curriculum Framework Policy by her SEP team as very high and rated it higher than the rest of the school staff. When asked what contributed to this higher understanding by SEP staff she said “me”. When C had first arrived at the school, she “wasn’t happy with the outcomes of a number of kids who were underperforming”. She had already started changing the curriculum when the Queensland Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Framework (QCAR) was released as a draft document. After investigating this document, she realized that “finally there was going to be a framework around including all kids” and this “motivated me”.

As a result of her understanding of the draft policy, C was able to **make sense** of the policy for the SEP staff. She “pitched it” to staff by encouraging them to be “ready” for any change either *P-12 Curriculum Framework* and/or the Australian curriculum. She had already done a lot of work changing the “mindset” of staff about curriculum from one centered in subject content to a **student centered approach**. C used professional dialogues to assist staff understand why all children should have the opportunity to learn the curriculum rather than preparing them for the “inevitability of not working by teaching them only functional life skills”. She noted that the persuasion of staff to align their work to QCAR was a “natural progression” from this and the team rewrote the year eight program, which included teaching, assessment and reporting, through teacher **collaborative planning**. This planning was done by starting with what the team already knew was successful and working from this. **Collaborative planning and delivery** has now progressed throughout the whole school. The SEP and general education staff now have **common and shared beliefs and actions** relating to student learning, curriculum, assessment

and reporting and is demonstrated by completion and delivery of curriculum which meets the needs of all learners.

The SEP and general education staff have and continue to spend much time in relevant **professional learning** to develop further the new mindset about students, curriculum planning and delivery. They work together to discuss the intent of the curriculum and how to assess student achievement. C describes **professional learning** as including in depth discussions about assessment. This in-depth discussion is necessary as every class with a SWD is co – taught by a SEP and general education teacher. As a team, these teachers need to **collaboratively plan** assessment and ensure that the **student is the centre** of the process.

In regard to assessment teachers plan a “range of options” for all learners to demonstrate their learning. C describes a process where every child maintains a portfolio of work for every KLA. They receive feedback about their achievement on every task in that portfolio and can “see how they are traveling” towards a particular mark overall – A,B,C,D, or E. They also have opportunity to re-submit some items after feedback for a “better mark”. The students then decide when they have completed their portfolio which items they will submit for final mark. The criteria for these assessment items are determined by the team of teachers and items are judged and moderated against the standard being assessed. The team has to be very explicit about what is being assessed and ensure teaching supports this. The students achievement is compared against their achievement of the standard not each other. The application of AfL in this example demonstrates how **the student is at the centre of the process and the teachers’ beliefs and actions reflect this**. However, this has not been easy to achieve.

C discusses in the interview the challenges of developing a teaching team that **engages in collaborative planning and delivery and has common beliefs and actions**. She describes the process of changing attitudes, practices and beliefs as “strangely being the hardest” with the

SEP teachers. These teachers generally had a lack of curriculum knowledge and provided only small group programs based upon life skills. She has had to resort to challenging staff practice, attitudes and behaviors sometimes through ‘tough conversations’, the “Code of Conduct” (Department of Education) process and other human resource options such as offering transfers to teachers who were not willing to engage in work of the team. She also challenged school practices. C describes how she “won over” staff by framing the discussion of changes to curriculum planning and delivery by explaining how the efficiencies of *P-12 Curriculum Framework* ( Queensland Government, 2008) would benefit them. This included arranging time for teachers to plan and creating curriculum leader positions who would lead the change.

The improved achievement and certification of SWD at C’s school is acknowledged by district, state and regional staff. C’s forward planning preparing staff for the P-12 Framework provided her with a catalyst for a wide variety of changes to the planning, delivery and assessment processes within the school. She has implemented complex and relevant leadership skills that included all the suggestions of this report for successful enactment of policy that is continuing to improve achievement for SWD. C continues to monitor her progress through critical analysis of documents, practices and professional learning activities. She invites feedback from teachers about her leadership and relational skills.

## Conclusion

This report concludes with the suggestion that Queensland’s *P-12 Curriculum Framework* provides schools with evidence – based directions as to how to improve achievement of SWD in the middle years through the curriculum process. The challenge continues to be how does a school go about persuading teachers to change and meet the requirements of policy, even when it is based upon good evidence about effective practice? This report suggests that the

answer to this challenge initially lies with the provision to schools with examples of where policy is enacted successfully. The story of C and how she has enacted the suggestions for success discussed in this report may prompt leaders to begin to meet this challenge.

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